

*The common Obstructions to Faith,
and a Good Life considered.*

A
S E R M O N

Preached in the
Chapel-Royal at St. James's,
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PERMION

Chas. J. Smith

By Order of the Board of
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 St. LUKE XXIV. 25.

Then he said unto them, O Fools and slow of heart to believe all that the Prophets have spoken.

THESE Words make a part of our Lord's Conversation with two of his Disciples, in their passage to *Emmaus*, on the Day he rose from the Dead; and do contain a reproof of those Doubts, and that perplexity of Mind, which his Sufferings and Death had created, and the Evidences already given of his being risen again, had not as yet removed. That Incredulity is here upbraided, as an Effect of *Folly*, and *Slowness of Heart*. Whereby cannot possibly be intended any such Weakness, or natural Want of Capacity, as should disable the Disciples, from apprehending the true force of Arguments, proper to prove his Resurrection. For this would have been matter, not of Rebuke, but Pity; and must have rendred all those Reasonings fruitless and absurd, which we find, in the following part of this Discourse, employed for their conviction. It must therefore certainly mean such Inconsideration, as did not duly attend to the Testimonies of them who had seen him; and particularly to those Predictions of the Prophets, which alone might have sufficed to let them see the Certainty, the Necessity indeed, of our Saviour's Resurrection. For thus much the Verses next following manifestly import: *Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? And, beginning* V. 26, 27. *at Moses and all the Prophets, he expounded un-*

to them, in all the Scriptures, the things concerning himself.

The Occasion of my Text being thus explained, I design to make this Twofold Use of it.

I. *First*, I shall enquire, to what Causes the Unbelief of these Disciples may most probably be imputed. And from thence

II. *Secondly*, I shall proceed to shew, what Obstructions and Indispositions of Mind it must be Our care to keep clear of; in order to believe, and practise those things, which the Gospel requires from us.

1. I begin with some Causes, to which the Folly of these Disciples, and their *Slowness to believe* the Predictions relating to this matter, may most probably be imputed.

I. Now *First*, One of these Causes seems to be intimated, in that very significant Expression, *All that the Prophets have spoken*. My meaning is, that, although the Disciples were not unacquainted with the Prophetick Writings; yet they did not attend to every part of these equally: Nor did they so consider and compare them with each other; as to discern their mutual Dependence, and the exact Harmony of the whole Scheme of Man's Redemption taken together.

The Predictions concerning the *Messiah* were of very different Sorts. Some had a more immediate regard to his humble and afflicted, Others, to his triumphant and glorified, State. And These, to Persons, not nice in Observation, might, nay in fact they did, appear to clash and contradict each other. That all the Triumphs and magnificent Characters of a mighty Deliverer, and Universal King, should belong to One, who expired under so painful and ignominious a Death; That He should be able to *save* so many Others, who, when tauntingly called uponto *come down from the Cross*,
did

did not; and therefore, it was supposed, could not, *save himself*: We must allow to be wide Extremes; at first view hard to be reconciled, as Properties belonging to the same Person. And yet this difficulty vanishes, when we recollect, that the *Captain of our Salvation was to be made perfect through Sufferings*, and that God hath very highly exalted the Lord Jesus, because he humbled himself, and became obedient unto Death, yea, even unto the death of the Cross. The being despised and rejected of men, a man of Sorrows, and acquainted with Grief, does then approve it self, as essential a part of the *Messiah's* Character; as the having a Name above every Name, and every knee in Heaven and Earth bowing to it. Each of These in truth had its proper Period. For Submission was ordained his way to Sovereignty; and the Conflict of enduring, to precede the Glories of his Conquest and Dominion. This is a method so plainly chalked out, in the Old Testament; that, had not these Disciples dwelt (as is very natural,) chiefly on the bright and most acceptable part of the Images, by which Christ is there represented; the very Argument they mention, as most discouraging, had proved an Antidote to their Despair. For, take the Tenure of all the Predictions fairly, and the Reasoning will proceed just the contrary way. The Chief Priests and Rulers, it is true, had delivered Jesus to be condemned to death, and had crucified him; but, had they not done so, the Prophecies could have found no due Accomplishment. And upon these Terms only, might a rational Comparer of them trust, that it was, nay infer, that it must needs be, He, who should redeem Israel.

2. A Second Cause of Disbelief in these Disciples was, probably, a Misconstruction of those very Prophecies, to which they did attend. And to

This two things seem to have contributed. The One, the Temper and Condition of the Jews at that very juncture of time. A People always proud, and of all others the most impatient of a foreign Yoke, would naturally give in to that Sense of their own Scriptures; which flattered their desires of Liberty, and of Conquest over the Enemies, who then held them in Subjection. And hence (by a Prejudice so common, that the Apostles themselves were plainly infected with it) many Passages seem to have been interpreted of Present or Temporal, which were principally, if not wholly, meant of Spiritual, or long distant, Victories and Deliverances.

The Other thing, by which this Prejudice was favoured, is the Manner, wherein such Prophecies are express'd. Whatever is Spiritual, or belongs to a future State, cannot be otherwise represented to our Understandings, than by being beholden to Images and Figures, borrowed from things, which we comprehend, and familiarly converse with. This is a Refuge, to which the very Nature of those Subjects drives us; And therefore the Gospel, with all its Simplicity and Plainness of Speech, submits very frequently to the Necessity of such Metaphors. But they were much more natural to the Style and Genius of the Prophets; They lived, and wrote, under a Dispensation full of Type and Shadow; and therefore they wrote agreeably to the Temper of their own Law, when the Veil of the Letter had some Mystical, and more noble, meaning couched under it. And this is the Case of many Scriptures, where the Conquests of Christ over his own and his People's Enemies, the Enlargement of his Dominion, and the perpetual Stability of his Kingdom, are described.

It is confess'd; In the Predictions relating to our
Lord's

Lord's Sufferings and Death, we insist upon a plain and literal Construction. And we have reason : because these are Events, which affected his Humane Nature only, and are therefore proportioned to a Humane Comprehension. But the Glories of his Exaltation, and Divine Nature, are neither present, nor level to our Minds ; And therefore we must not understand the Resemblances describing those, strictly as they lie before us ; but as expressions modelled, and ordered so, as we are able to conceive of matters out of sight, and so far above us. The want of this Distinction seems to have fastned down the thoughts of these Apostles, to an entirely Temporal Conquest and Kingdom. And they were therefore *slow in believing Jesus* to be the *Messias*, because his Persecution, and Reproach, and ignominious Death, were manifestly inconsistent with the notions they then had, of *all that the Prophets had spoken*, upon this Occasion.

3. Another Obstruction to these Disciples, might be an Apprehension of the Impossibility of our Lord's rising again. Some Notions of the Soul's Immortality, and a future State, seem to have lain at the bottom even of Natural Religion. Some persuasion of a general Resurrection, at the last Day, the better and sounder part of the Jews entertain'd. Both these Doctrines however were dark and confused ; till brought to light by *Jesus* and his Gospel. But, that a Man should die, and return from the Grave in three Days, and live upon this Earth again in the same Body, was somewhat so astonishing and new ; that we find it foretold, as the last and most irrefragable Evidence of our Lord's Messiahship. Such, as when so foretold, the Disciples are constantly observed not to have understood. And, though the Prophets of old had declared, that thus it should be ; yet no expectation of it now remained. Nor were they careful to apply those

Predictions, to a Person, in appearance forsaken of God, and given up entirely to the Will of his Murderers. Thus, by opposing their fond Reasonings, to the Truth and Promises of Almighty God, they made his Power and Revelation stoop and bend, to their own mean apprehensions of things: and were foolishly slow, in believing that to be done; of which they vainly thought, that it could not, or were not able to give themselves any account, how it should, be done.

4. The *Fourth* and Last Cause, I shall mention, of this Folly, and Slowness of Faith, might possibly have an Influence, as strong as any of the rest. I mean the deep and very tender Concern, these Disciples then lay under, for the Death and supposed loss of their beloved Master and Friend, Every one, who hath taken any pains at all to observe and know himself, must needs have found, how very differently he argues and judges, when under any violent Perturbation of Mind, from what he is wont to do, when free, and calm, and cool. The Understanding, at those unhappy Seasons, sees nothing in its true colours and proportions. Every Object is changed and tinged by the false *Medium*, through which it passes; and all degrees of Probability are magnified or lessened according to the present Complexion of the Man, and the Passion, which sits supreme in his Soul.

This is the Case of Every vehement Impression. But Grief and Melancholy in particular, do, by a natural effect, sink and damp the Spirits; fix upon the dark and dismal side of the matter, and keep us obstinately blind and deaf to all appearances of Happiness and Comfort. Now such was the Condition of these Disciples; The Affection they bore to their Dearest Lord, would not suffer them before, to credit the Warnings he gave of his approaching Death. And now the vehemence of
their

their Surprise, and Sorrow for that Death, rendred them every whit as incapable of believing his Resurrection.

II. Thus much with regard to the Case of the Disciples themselves. I now proceed to my Second General Head: The Profit we should make of this Example, by taking occasion from hence to observe, what are the Obstructions and like Indispositions of Mind, which we must keep clear of; in order to believe and practise, as we ought, those things, which the Gospel requires from us.

I. *First* then. Let the defect of these Disciples in not applying their thoughts to *All that the Prophets had spoken*, teach us, of how great advantage it will be, to stand equally and sincerely disposed to every Branch of a Christian's Duty. When Religion is considered, with no other view, but that of knowing and submitting to All, that comes back'd with rational and sufficient Evidence; it can scarce happen, that a Man should long continue, under any dangerous Error in Judgment, or gross Enormity in Practice. But if we bring Partiality and Prejudice, and corrupt Interests along with us; scarce any Command is so plain, but it may be overlooked or evaded; Scarce any Opinion so extravagant, but it may be entertained and espoused; Scarce any Wickedness so flagrant, but it is capable of being indulged and abetted. Daily Experience shews, how very discerning and severe we are, in those faults of Others, to which our own Temper and Circumstances give us no Inclination. But, are we not at the same time as stupid, and positively blind, to some favourite Vices of our Own, against which the Scriptures are as express, and the Threatnings of God in no degree less severe? The Covetous Person is abundantly convinced of the heinousness of Luxury and Prodigality; and the Intemperate and Profuse

as clearly see the Sin and Deformity of Sordidness and Avarice. But charge each of these with his own proper crime ; And the One covers himself under the specious Pretences, of Hospitality and Decent Living, Generous contempt of the World, and *Taking no thought for the morrow* : While the other as readily quotes you Texts, for Sobriety, Frugality, and provident Care of Families. And yet, whether these Men will suffer themselves to be made sensible of it, or no ; Both of them are manifestly under the same Condemnation. For St. Paul in one breath peremptorily declares, that neither *Covetous*, nor *Extortioners*, nor *Riotous*, nor *Drunkards*, nor the *Effeminate and Unclean*, *shall inherit the kingdom of Christ, and of God.*

1 Cor. vi.

9, 10.

Eph. v. 5.

The Case is so very much alike in most other Instances ; that, generally speaking, the plainest Proof goes for nothing with Men prepossess'd against it; and the slightest Shadow of a Reason hath all the force of Demonstration, in Matters that Men are desirous should be true. In good earnest, and to speak freely. Can it be reasonably thought a breach of Charity, to say, that Education, and Humour, and Convenience, and Fondness for a Party, and Respect of Persons, make up the Religion of too too many ; And these are Cheats, wrought up to such a Nicety ; as not only to pass very often upon the World, but sometimes to impose upon the Man's own self. Inso-much that, were every one, without reserve or disguise, to lay open the true Principles of his Conduct ; Not as he makes profession of them to the World, but as he argues and determines upon them in his own Closet ; Good God ! how many wild and different Systems should we discover ? And how far distant would most of them appear, from That, which yet All, who retain but the Form of Godliness, agree in appealing to,

as their common Rule and Measure, the Gospel of the Lord Jesus? The Power at least of Religion is perfectly overthrown by such a partial Obedience. For, while we confine our Application to such Instances, as are best accommodated to our Inclinations or Affairs; we do not submit to the Authority of God, but make a new Law to our selves. A Law, which cannot profit them that are under it, For as, in my Text, that *Folly* and *Slowness of heart* could not escape reproof, which narrowed the Disciples Faith, by not taking in *All* that the Prophets had spoken; So, neither in the Practical part of our Duty, will any Reserves or Distinctions for convenience be allowed; but upon that Condition only does Christ esteem us his *Friends*, if we be careful to *do whatsoever he commands* us.

John xv
14.

2. But these Disciples were defective, *Secondly*, in Misinterpreting those very Prophecies, to which they did attend. And this is a good warning against misapplying the Rule of our Actions. Corrupt Interests and Carnal Affections will dispose us, not only to overlook and neglect, but, which is full as bad, to bend, and wrest, and rack the Holy Scriptures; till we make them seem at least to speak a Sense, that is for our purpose. We then see more or less in every Text, as it favours or discountenances, the Prejudices we have entertain'd; The Advantages we are in pursuit of, The Passions we are govern'd by, Or the Party we have given our selves up to. Now it should always be remembred, that the Word of God is that unalterable Standard, by which all our Concerns must be weigh'd and tryed. By This we are to live here; and by This we are to stand or fall hereafter. And then those things will be sure to rise in judgment against us; which we saw, but would not see. Then those false glosses will
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be detected and exposed, which artful Hypocrites do now, with wicked Industry, obtrude upon the unwary, as Oracles of God; when his Word spoke no such thing. It behoves us all therefore to deal Sincerely, and not to tamper with our Consciences, in a case of such mighty moment; where all Fraud will not fail one day to be discovered, to the Deceiver's utter Confusion and everlasting Ruin. For God is especially concerned to vindicate the honour of his Laws, from such outrageous Abuses, as insult him, above even the most open and impious Profanations. Even the most profligate Life, I say, betrays not a more provoking Contempt of Religion; than that vile Cunning, which perverts the Scripture, by making it an Engine of Villany, and Vice, and Faction. And it were much fairer and honest, in the Enemies of Virtue, quite to renounce this Holy Book; than only to make it the tool of their own ungodly Lusts; and so carry on the Work of Hell, by a pretended Authority from Heaven.

But I observed before, that the Error of these Disciples was owing, not altogether to their own Prejudices; but in part, it is probable, to the Nature and Manner of the Prophetick Writings themselves. And Another useful Reflection to be made from hence, is, That in order to a right understanding of Scripture, Integrity alone will not suffice; but the Honesty of the Intention must be supported and guided by competent Knowledge and Skill in the Judgment. The Proprieties of Language, The Customs of the Age and People then in Being, The Genius of the Writer, The particular Occasion and main Scope of each Book, The Connexion of it's several Parts, And the Suitableness of the Application we make, to the Author's original Meaning and Design; All these
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are requisite to a thorough understanding of Scripture.

But, can every vulgar Reader come provided with these Qualifications? No. Nor is it expected he should. And yet he ought to read, and may read very profitably, notwithstanding. For every portion of that Blessed Book does not stand in need of so great Preparation. Some are so plain and easie; that nothing, but perfect Stupidity, or Want of Attention, or Wilful Blindness, can mistake them. And it is God's great Goodness, and Man's great Happiness, that the most necessary parts of Scripture are the most easie to be understood. In These therefore every Man may exercise himself: And, for the Rest, if they be read with due Reverence, Humility, and Modesty, God will enlighten Mens Minds, and enlarge their Knowledge, so far as He sees convenient. In Some Things they may be assisted by Those, whom God hath appointed to watch over their Souls. The Divines of This Church, it is charitably to be presumed, will remember to whom they are accountable, and dare not; Or, if they durst, they have not any temptation, that I know of, to mislead Men, in the Sense of those Oracles of the most High, the free and frequent use whereof is not only indulged, but earnestly and daily recommended, to their Flocks. It is therefore most unjust to insinuate, as some Sons of Slander, (according to the modern way of pouring all manner of Contempt upon the Clergy) of late have done; that the like blame or suspicion of Deceit lies against the Guides of Our Communion, as belongs to those of the Church of *Rome*. Her Tyranny proves her an unnatural Stepmother, by hiding from her Children the *Key of that Knowledge*, which alone can make them *wise unto Salvation*. But why, for God's sake, should We envy the Im-

prove.

provements of our Charge? We, who are acted by a different Principle; and We too, whom manifold Experience convinces, that Religion, and its Ministers, meet always with best treatment, from the Persons, who most sincerely consider, and best understand them? But, while we could be glad, all the Lord's People were Prophets; we think our Advice should not be taken amiss, that They, who are not Prophets, would not pretend to be so. As knowing too, how much Religion and the Peace of the World suffer, by the vain Presumption of men *wise in their own conceits*; who are not content themselves, nor will allow Others, to *think soberly, and as they ought to think*. We acknowledge some Subjects too sublime for our Comprehension; Such as ought to be approached with humble wonder; and of which Men may with more safety choose to continue meekly ignorant; than hazard their Virrue, and the Scandal of their Brethren, by a bold, and troublesome, and always fruitless, Curiosity. And this leads me to a *Third* Reflection; proper to the Case of these Disciples, which is.

3. That the Declaration of God is a sufficient Ground of Faith, how unaccountable soever the Matter declared may otherwise be to us. The Disciples seem to have opposed, to the Prophecies of Christ's Resurrection, the presumed Impossibility of the thing. Which was putting the Matter upon a wrong Issue; and teaches us, what measures should be taken, with regard to all the Mysterious points of the Christian Doctrine. Not that, (according to the common but ignorant Clamour,) Reason is even here to be excluded; but only kept to its proper business. Now This is to examine the Credibility of the Testimony. An Enquiry, which Reason is not only qualified, but bound, to make. But when the Testimony is approved

proved, Reason hath done it's Office , and all the difficulties, arising from the Nature of the Thing testified, are thenceforth to be placed to the Account of Faith. That God is Infinite, Omnipotent, and True; That He is greater, That he can do more, than any finite Mind can conceive; And that he will do all, which he hath declared and foretold shall be done; These are Maxims readily assented to by Reason. When therefore, according to all the Rules of sober Interpretation, the acknowledged Word of God delivers things, *to Us incomprehensible*; Reason it self requires, that we submit and give credit to them. In this Case They are Wise indeed, who satisfy themselves with being *Wise, according to That which is written*. But They, who presume to intrude into *Secrets, which no Man hath seen, or can see, while they profess themselves to be very wise, become very fools*,

4. Lastly, That Grief, which bore down the Faith of these Disciples, should awaken our Care to moderate and subdue all our Passions in general. Alas! how frail a thing is Humane Nature, when we have in the Text so sensible a Proof, that even They, who of all Mortals had the greatest Advantages, when over-power'd by these, were no more than Common Men? When Passion gets head, Presence of Mind is lost; the Storm soon grows too loud, for Reason or Religion to be heard; Our Actions are irregular and violent; and such a Mist is cast before our Eyes, that we can no longer discern Decency, or Duty, or Truth. Thus the Sensual and Voluptuous are blind to the Reasonableness of Temperance, Self-denial, and Mortification; So are the Greedy and Ambitious, to that of leaving all, and following Christ; The Angry and Revengeful can see no manner of Necessity for pardoning Injuries, and loving Enemies:

Nor

Nor the Proud and Imperious, any Beauty at all in Meekness, Humility, and mutual Condescension. And yet the very things, which to such Men are Foolishness, are in reality the truest and most perfect Wisdom. So necessary is it, that these *Superfluities of naughtiness* (as St. James expresses himself) *should be put away*; to make room for that *Word of God*, which must be *engrafted* in their stead, before it can *save* our Souls. For, till Religion be the Ruling Principle, we are not under the Law of Liberty; but in the very worst of all Bondage, Slaves to our Affections and Lusts. Let us labour therefore by all means to break this Chain asunder; if it be but in order to qualify us for judging and acting like Men. Truth asks no more at our hands, than that we will come to it cool and considerate. The more justly we think, the more of Excellence we shall descry in every Branch of our Duty. Which is in truth designed to make us here in some degree, what we hope to be in perfection hereafter. Masters, I mean, of our selves, even while we have Passions upon Earth; to prepare us for that Heaven, where they will give us no disturbance. But all unruly Passions shall be swallowed up in Universal Charity; Endless and unbounded Joy; the ravishing Contemplation, and the most ardent Love, of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; Three Persons, and one God; To whom be Honour and Praise, Adoration, and Thanksgiving, now and for evermore. *Amen.*

FINIS.

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